Current Literature

BOOKS IN GENERAL

OWING to the youth of our bell-ringers, who, I understand, are sent early to bed, I was not able to hear the New Year rung in and, in consequence, have had to imagine for myself that we were all making a fresh start in 1934. While I was lying in bed this came easily enough, but when I looked out of the window the morning fog looked so much like the fog of the day before that it was difficult to realise how changed everything was. I had to remind myself that the fog was making a fresh start also. Indeed, that good habits and bad habits, unpaid bills, unwritten books, bad conscience and hopeless longings had all gotten themselves willy-nilly into 1934 together and were all starting off on the same familiar handicap. The discouraging thing about this reflection was that nothing had got itself left behind, and this depressed me for a bit while I was dressing, until I remembered that December had been left behind, which was in itself a sufficient cause of rejoicing.

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Yet, in spite of my longing for the New Year, I spent the last day of the old in a state of enjoyment that is rare in any month: in reading a most lovely story, *The House with the Apricot*, by H. E. Bates (Golden Cockerel Press, 21*s*.). While I was reading it I forgot everything, I forgot my cold in the head and in what room I was sitting. I became in short the *I* of Bates's tale. Everything in the story, the flowers, the shapes of the hills, the mahogany bedroom furniture and Mr. Skinner putting on his pince-nez to carve the chicken, made the same kind of indelible impression that things sometimes do in real life. And then when I had come to the last page and I knew that my experience had been reading a story in a very prettily printed book, it seemed at the same time to have become part of my own distant and unforgettable memories. I had been walking over the hills, had passed the house and put up there as a traveller, taking my meal with the woman and the old man, and then I had gone on and looked down on the derelict farm where Mr. Skinner sat swigging whisky and water and singing bawdy songs. What gives a story this peculiar vividness, what makes the reader apply it to himself in this way? There are some writers with whom I always find myself identified when I read them: Stendhal, Turgenev, and Tolstoy are examples. Other writers give me a picture equally clear, but seen in perspective from a distance. The second kind of book may be just as fine a work of art and as profoundly moving as the first without ever giving that odd tang that makes one exclaim: "Yes, I have felt just that, seen that place, met these people!" As soon as I had come to the following passage in *The House with the Apricot* I knew that I had been there before, and began to live in the story myself.

> It was a fine room she had given me. As I changed my clothes I kept looking round it in wonder—in wonder at the bed of pale old mahogany with its green silk spread and the lace on the pillow slips, at the heavy green curtains with long tassel-ropes at the window, at the chairs and the chest of drawers and the writing desk in one corner, all of mahogany and all old and beautiful. There was a strange half-sweet, half-musty smell about the room that for a long time I couldn't define. It was not until the bell rang for supper and I went downstairs and breathed it again that I knew it. It was the smell of prosperity.

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H. E. Bates, in my opinion, is a much finer writer than is commonly realised. He is unequal and he is extremely prolific of short thumb-nail sketches, but so it must be remembered was Tchehov. Bates's work is liable to be undervalued, not only because he is prolific of little things, but because he is not a very original writer; his great merit is not originality, but sensibility. His sensitiveness to beauty and to character is astonishing; it is, I think, greater than the sensibility of any other living English writer, and, because of it, his work always reminds me of the painting of Renoir. His best stories have the extreme delicacy and tenderness of Renoir's paint, and do not impress by their strength so much as by their fragility. In his good work Bates has plenty of strength, it is particularly noticeable in *Charlotte's Row*, but in his bad work it seems to evaporate, and one is left with nothing but an affected, or perhaps genuine, hankering after "aesthetic" effects. Bates has another characteristic besides sensibility and a love for the same kinds of beauty, in common with Renoir, for he learned to write just as Renoir learned to paint, *au Musée*. The alert critic will discover traces of Stephen Crane, Tchehov and Turgenev, and many other writers in Bates's work.

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When I had finished reading *The House with the Apricot* I took up his last novel, *The Fallow Land*, which I had put off reading for just over a year because I had been disappointed by *Catherine Foster*, a book which has the delicacy which one finds in the short stories, but which is noticeably lacking in force. *The Fallow Land*, on the other hand, is distinguished by greater force than is to be found in any of the short stories. Moreover, the book is not one picture of a character, or an episode, but the record of the whole of several people's lives. Every gift that Bates has got is found in this book, which is much the biggest and most important thing that he has done. I have not read, I think, a finer novel of farm life. And my belated discovery, coming after reading *The House with the Apricot*, made the last day of the Old Year an extremely happy one.

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And in the New Year, one of the things to which I very much look forward is a venture which is being made, without any capital, by five writers, H. E. Bates, Calder-Marshall, Hamish Miles, L. A. Pavey and Geoffrey West, with E. J. O'Brien at their head, to publish short stories. There has been a steady revival of interest in the short story of recent years, which must be largely due to E. J. O'Brien's collections. There has, of course, always been a market for certain types of stories in the magazines, but this usually passes the original and interesting writers by. Nothing is more striking than the way in which editors who set out to give their public really first-class stories show signs of distress whenever they come across one. Recently, however, a young American has provided these timid fellows with an excellent object-lesson by starting a magazine for stories only. At first he could neither afford to print his magazine nor to pay his authors, but, nevertheless, he gallantly "published" cyclostyled copies, first from Vienna and later from Majorca. But a year ago he returned to America and, raising some money, published the first printed number of *Story*, just as the banks were suspending payment. On all sides magazines and publishers were vanishing from the scene, but *Story* flourished and is flourishing now, though I have only just discovered it. The venture which E. J. O'Brien, Bates and the others are going to bring out is avowedly started in imitation of *Story*. There are to be six numbers in the year, and seven shillings and sixpence is not too much to pay to see what they are going to write themselves and find by other people. And why this revival of the short story? It occurs to me that it may be because young writers are no longer copying Maupassant. A very great artist sometimes has a paralysing influence which lasts for many years after his death. He appears almost to have exhausted his medium, and I think that Maupassant had this effect in England. His influence on that brilliant writer Somerset Maugham is evident in *Ah King*, his last volume of stories, in which the method has been reduced to a mere formula. Maupassant's particular trick, if I may speak so disrespectfully, was forcing an unsuspected emotion on the reader much as the three-card trick man forces the choice of a card. To attempt to equal that marvellous virtuosity almost always leads to woodenness. And the Maupassant story, like the smoking-room story, always had to have a point, a point as sharp as a stiletto. That was a deadly limitation. For the effect of a story may diffuse itself, like a perfume from every line.

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